Diary

Angus Trumble

A FEW WEEKS AGO, I went to see a painting in Branford, Connecticut. The owners live in a large house surrounded by woods. The picture is a fine copy of an early seventeenth-century portrait by Anthony Van Dyck. From my precarious vantage point on top of a wobbly stepladder, the canvas appeared to be machine-woven, which means that it cannot have been made, or paint applied to it, before the 1820s. Fortunately, the owners already know this, and are philosophical.

Along with several other paintings by Van Dyck, the original was bought in Genoa in 1828 by the Scottish painter David Wilkie for Sir Robert Peel, the future British prime minister. This copy turned up much later in the collection of a New Hampshire congressman. Now it has come to Branford. Something about those crisp Wilkie-ish touches of white makes me wonder if this replica was actually done by Wilkie himself, during the short period in which he handled the sale of the original. All those Regency painters copied Van Dyck like mad. This may turn out to be one of those Pooterish discoveries that give me particular pleasure. We shall see.

By coincidence, a few days earlier I saw a bunch of Wilkies in Minneapolis. They are in Patrick Noon's fine Regency exhibition called *Crossing the Channel*, which is all about artistic relations between France and England. Wilkie emerges as a key figure, as does the great Richard Parkes Bonington, who died of consumption shortly before his twenty-sixth birthday. I wonder what would have happened if Bonington had lived another seventy years instead of his exact contemporary Thomas Sidney Cooper, who painted cows until, aged ninety-eight, he finally conked out in 1902. Bonington might have changed everything. Would he have become a Pre-Raphaelite? Another burning question of our day.

After leaving the exhibition, I wended my way past the creepy German Expressionist pictures and came face-to-face with a brilliant grain stack painting by Monet, about which there was something very familiar. Turns out this masterpiece was owned by Robert and Janet Holmes à Court, and hung for a while in Canberra. Someone once told me that on the day of the auction in London they placed bids for the Monet by telephone from Perth, sitting up in bed. It was a great purchase and, eventually, a sad loss for Australia. She should have held onto it.

For a place that is on the road to nowhere, Minneapolis is full of surprises. The airport is vast, and the coffee unexpectedly good. From the bar of my hotel, I watched a colossal white stretch Hummer with tinted windows disgorge a couple of portly rap stars and their chirruping entourage.

Our works on paper department invited me to join their expedition through the glorious Berkshires in northwestern Massachusetts to visit the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute of Art in rural Williamstown. The Clark's summer exhibition of late Turner seascapes is small but splendid. It is good to see our paintings and watercolours hanging in such distinguished company. Somebody asked the curator how the Clarks made their money. 'He inherited everything, and never worked a day in his life,' was the forthright answer. (It was the Singer sewing machine fortune.) Francine Clark must have been a character. She was a French actress, and hoovered up Renoirs. Happily, they bought a lot of other things as well.

London, hot? What nonsense. The flat I am renting is convenient, quiet, and eerily resembles those John le Carré safe houses where George Smiley goes to pore over photographs. The sitting room window looks onto the back of the London Library. The wallpaper is strange. There is carpet in the lavatory. The person next door has lots of visitors arriving singly at all hours. The nearest Sainsbury's is wildly, playfully expensive.

At Christie's, Dame Shirley Bassey is selling her gowns for charity. The sale catalogue is enormously camp. I think I might like one for my guest bedroom. In the time-honoured manner, I ask Martin Beisly, who is in charge of Victorian paintings, if he has a spare copy. 'Of course', he says, proceeding to look under the counter, in cupboards, high and low. He asks around, then gets on the phone. Long minutes slip by. Please don't worry about it, *please*. But nothing is too much trouble. At length, to my horror, the person in charge of charity auctions emerges to explain that for these events no complimentary catalogues are available, at which point, before I can stop him, Martin actually buys me one, with his own money, for £25. I will make it up to him, somehow.

The last thing I did before returning to America was to visit the Saatchi collection in its grand new London County Council premises, nearly opposite the Palace of Westminster. What a depressing experience. The collection hangs in corridors and little offices, heavily panelled, while the old favourites (shark, Myra, dead dad, Tracey's bed) are in a pompous rotunda, looking tired. Almost everything flat has been heavily reframed 'to match' — a wry commentary on the strategies and conceit of art museums? Possibly. It does not work.

Back in New Haven, unpacking books, I come across Kathleen Bermingham's *Gateway to the South East* (Millicent, South Australia: The South Eastern Times, Ltd., 1961), a grand chronicle of the Guichen Bay district, long out-of-print, for which the designation 'local history' is in every way inadequate. 'The Gay 1860s! Why were they gay? Why did they make one think of Laughter, of Gaiety, and of Song?' asks Miss Bermingham in connection with Robe. For a few moments, I am thrown off-balance by a mountainous wave of homesickness.